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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000027

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SUBJECT: YOUNG IRANIAN ACTIVIST SPEAKS OUT

REF: A. (A) 2008 BAKU 1156
[1](#)B. (B) 2008 ISTANBUL 615

Classified By: POLECON COUNSELOR ROB GARVERICK FOR REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

Summary:

[1](#)1. (C) A young Iranian women's rights activist and writer studying in Baku discussed women's rights issues in Iran with Baku Iran watcher. The activist, forced to study in Azerbaijan due to politically-motivated withdrawal of her university acceptance in Iran, discussed recent incidents of Iranian regime harassment of women's rights figures. Despite (or because of) what she described as aggressive regime pressure and regressive institutionalized discrimination against women, the student asserted that Iranian feminism is both stronger and more broadly supported than feminist movements in neighboring countries. She also outlined a seemingly contradictory trend in Iran whereby overall private and inside-the-family freedoms and attitudes towards women are rapidly liberalizing at the same time that legal and regime-imposed social restrictions on women are becoming more repressive. She also commented on some strengths and weaknesses of the recent USG-funded regional women's rights conference in Istanbul, which she helped organize and attended (reftels). Maryam's comments on Iranian student/youth attitudes and activities in Baku and Iran are reported septel. End Summary.

Iranian Student in Baku

[1](#)2. (C) Maryam is a 22-year old Iranian from Ardebil currently studying medicine at a university in Baku. According to Maryam, she has been a vocal supporter of Shirin Ebadi and an active campaigner for women's rights since high school, and was a student organizer of the annual "Babek Tower" march and rally (a symbol of Azeri identity and pride), and involved with unofficial Azeri-Iranian cultural groups (Note: all of these activities are strongly discouraged by the Teheran regime. End Note.) She is also an author of "apolitical" children's stories that have been published in Iranian magazines.

[1](#)3. (C) According to Maryam, her high school activism (possibly compounded by regime displeasure with her journalist father) resulted in a one month detention by the Iranian authorities without charge. Although released and allowed to graduate, she claimed that her admission to the University of Tabriz medical school was abruptly withdrawn "for political reasons," despite her high score in the national university entrance exam. After this development

she relocated to Baku in order to pursue university studies here. Maryam's remarried father preceded her to Baku, and has applied to UNHCR for resettlement as a political refugee. Maryam is not a party to his request, and claims to be uninterested in emigrating. "I'm an Iranian and want to live in Iran," she said.

¶4. (C) Maryam noted that she returns frequently to Iran, sometimes experiencing lengthy admission delays and interrogations. Despite the risk that "one day they may arrest me again," she stressed that she is "doing nothing wrong," and continues to network with Iranian and Azerbaijani feminists and cultural activists while simultaneously pursuing "a normal student life." She occasionally works with prominent Azerbaijani women's rights activist Novella Jafaroglu, who has Iranian roots and follows events in Iran. Maryam participated in the November 28-29, 2008 regional Women's Rights Conference organized by Jafaroglu and held in Istanbul last November and attended by more than twenty Iranian and Iranian diaspora delegates (Note: this conference was indirectly funded by the USG through an Iranian outreach grant to Jafaroglu's group; conference participants were not informed of this indirect funding relationship - see reftels. End Note).

Alleged Intimidation of Conference Invitees

¶5. (C) Maryam reported that two Iranian activists invited to the conference were unable to attend due to being placed

BAKU 00000027 002 OF 003

under house arrest in Teheran (one only two days before she was to depart). She added that five Iranian attendees at the Istanbul women's rights conference were taken aside by security personnel at Teheran airport while waiting to board their airplane to Istanbul. She said that two of the women, one associated with Shirin Ebadi's group, were interrogated for more than an hour. According to Maryam, all of the women were asked why they were going to Turkey, and when they answered were asked if they knew who was sponsoring/paying for the conference, who else was attending, and why "they" were singled out for an invitation. While all were ultimately allowed to depart, Maryam said that the women told her and Jafaroglu that they were warned to submit full reports on the conference and who attended after they returned to Iran, "or we will deal with you." (Note: According to both Maryam and Jafaroglu, to the best of their knowledge as of January 10, 2009 no the Iranian Istanbul Conference attendees has been harassed about the conference since returning to Iran. End Note).

Monitoring of Women's and Human Rights Activists

¶6. (C) Maryam emphasized that all/all women's rights and human rights activists in Iran are watched by the authorities and carefully monitored. She added that all of their phone calls are tapped, as well as "all international phone calls" made to or by anyone in Iran. Maryam observed that, despite the absence of any publicity about the conference the authorities knew exactly who to detain, and where and why they were going. She stressed that these women are not campaigning for regime change and were not doing anything in any sense illegal, wrong, or even provocative by attending the conference.

¶7. (C) Maryam described these airport pull asides as "standard intimidation" intended to bully and frighten, and to underline the regimes discouragement of international NGO contacts and washing dirty laundry abroad. She observed that, until recently, women's and children's rights associations have been among the few civil society organizations critical of Iranian society generally tolerated; this may now be changing, and the risk of arrest

and other "illegal punishment" of activists and sympathizers by representatives of the regime is real.

Public Repression - Private Liberalization

18. (C) Maryam contrasted what she described as "increasingly regressive" institutionalized official and legal discrimination against women with what she said are increasingly liberal practices and attitudes in broader society. Noting that a majority of Iranian university graduates are women, Maryam asserted that most women in Iran exercise greater freedom within the home than their counterparts in Turkey and Azerbaijan. For example, she said, few Iranian wives would allow their husbands to forbid them from working (a practice which still occurs in Azerbaijan). She said that in general "indoors" attitudes and social practices (including male/female mixing) are liberalizing, "especially within the younger generation." She reiterated that the lives of many women in Iran within the family are freer, and opportunities for personal independence greater, than in other countries in the region. "Their laws may be (more) liberal, but their (social) practices are conservative; our situation is the opposite."

19. (C) She contended that one ironic result of increasing state measures against women in Iran is that feminism as a movement is much stronger, better organized, and more broadly supported in Iran than in Turkey, Azerbaijan, and other regional countries. Many Iranians are aware of the discrimination against women and related reactionary behavior practiced by supporters of the regime, and are battling against it ("including Ayatollah Khomeini's granddaughter and other members of his family). This can be seen, she said, not only in the publicized activities of people like Shirin Ebadi, but in broader grass roots consciousness-raising activities. She opined that greater understanding of challenges facing women in Iran is urgently needed. She added that organized protests (or the fear of them) in Iran and abroad have helped stall further institutionalized mistreatment of women, such as a recent effort by Islamic conservatives to remove the need for a first wife to agree to

BAKU 00000027 003 OF 003

her husband adding a second to the household.

Child Marriage and Honor Killings

10. (C) Asked about child marriage laws enacted by the regime (which permit marriage to women as young as eight), she said that this law is regarded with contempt by most Iranians. She alleged the practice is limited to a few (Iranian) "Kurds, Arabs, and clerics," adding that these same groups are also the predominant practitioners of "honor killings," which she claimed are not prosecuted and thus de facto tolerated by the regime, though condemned by most Iranians.

Comments on Istanbul Women's Rights Conference

11. (C) Turning to the conference itself, Maryam praised it for broadening Iranian activists domestic and foreign networks and brought together disparate ethnic (Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, Azeri, Persian, and Azeri) and regional groups from within Iran as well as diaspora Iranians (some affiliated with banned groups) that would normally not be in contact with one another. She also praised Jafaroglu and the other non-Iranian conference leaders for keeping conference discussions on message and effectively short-circuiting occasional efforts to shift the discussion away from women's rights issues to those involving the rights of ethnic or religious minorities and similar sensitive issues.

12. (C) One positive result, she said, was a series of very

constructive discussions among the Iranians who attended (including some local Iranian students), which she said continued in rooms and the lobby of the conference hotel until well after midnight. She cited the ability to develop contacts between Iranian and foreign NGOs, and better publicize the "poorly understood" institutionalized challenges to women in Iran, as additional constructive aspects. In the latter respect, she related that the Azerbaijani and Turkish participants were shocked to learn that the Iranian Constitution explicitly places the legal position of women at half that guaranteed men.

¶13. (C) On the downside, she criticized what she characterized "last minute" logistics preparations (e.g., using an attending Iranian student as a Farsi-Turkish translator the first day because a professional had not been recruited). More importantly, she argued that the Azerbaijani and Turkish participants "simply didn't understand our reality (as Iranians)," and did not take seriously enough the safety and security risks facing the Iranians by virtue of participating in an event set up by an organization (Jafaroglu's) that is a recipient of U.S. and Israeli government funds and talks loosely about this. While endorsing more such regional conferences (including possible events focusing on children's rights, drug addiction, and/or environment), she urged that a different organizing body be used as "official" organizer, "ideally a (Turkish or Azerbaijani) university." Under this scenario she suggested that groups like Jafaroglu's could still be involved, but with less profile.

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